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ABSTRACT

One problem confronting theater directors is how to revive a play in such a way as to give it new relevance to a contemporary audience, and there many unhappy examples of this dilemma. Each director is concerned with exploring the text, and in some cases, manipulating the content, in order to bring out new meanings. Whether controversial or traditional, the first step for a director is to establish a goal, to have a point of view. Presenting a point of view, however, does not automatically mean distortion of the content or the inherent meaning of a playscript. Gathering information and making judgments is part of the process of understanding tradition and seeking relevance. Newly discovered values in the seldom produced classics can sometimes lead to exciting revivals. One must realize, however, that even in the carefully prepared process of reviving a play with contemporary relevance, the directing process is fraught with risks. One risk is that the audience or the critics may evaluate the results differently from the director. Problems can be minimized if the director studies the chosen play within its total cultural context, relates values of the past to those of the present, and develops a point of view with meaningful perspective. (HOD)

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REVIVAL/INNOVATION: THE DIRECTOR'S DILEMMA

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REVIVAL/INNOVATION: THE DIRECTOR'S DILEMMA

A recent example of the director's dilemma in reviving a play from the past and producing it innovatively is the Jo Anne Akalaitis successful but controversial staging of Samuel Beckett's Endgame at the American Repertory Theatre. Douglas Stein's subway tunnel setting with mechanical debris and flickering lights suggesting the death throes of technology, interracial casting of the roles Hamm and Clov, and Philip Glass incidental music resulted in a disclaimer insert in the program strongly worded by the 78 year-old playwright.[1] Mr. Beckett called the Akalaitis production "a complete parody of the play" and stated it was "completely unacceptable to me." Robert Brustein, artistic director of the American Repertory Theatre, where Endgame was being revived also noted in the program (after an out-of-court compromise), "To insist on strict adherence to each parenthesis of the published text not only robs collaborative artists of their interpretive freedom but threatens to turn the theatre into a waxworks."[2] Barney Rossett, president of Grove Press, called the production "a travesty" and "a gross distortion" of Beckett's 1956 classic.

The reason for this public controversy was that the playwright was still alive, It stirred debate among leading writers, directors, designers, publishers, and theatre lawyers in a two-hour exchange

before a capacity audience of 475 at New York University in December of 1984.[3] The only panelist who did not enter into the debate was the director, Jo Anne Akalaitis, who said, "I take my work so seriously, I would never debate it. Debates are for lawyers and critics."[4]

No respectable director wishes a production to be a travesty or a work of wax whether the author is dead or alive. And probably no director wishes to be curtailed in interpretive freedoms. So, what is the problem? As long as the playwright lives and is aware of public performances of original work the controversy is likely to arise at least in the commercial arena. When the play comes into public domain and the playwright is not alive the written drama is frozen in the pages of history. To revive it is to make it live again, to return it to consciousness, to restore it from a depressed, inactive, unused state.[5] To be innovative is to introduce something as or as if new; a new idea, method, or device.[6] A dilemma suggests a problem seemingly incapable of a satisfactory solution or making a choice between equally unsatisfactory alternatives. Certainly if the choices are between the waxworks and travesty the dilemma will persist. The problem, then, for a director is how a play may be revived in such a way as to give it new relevance to a contemporary audience. The goal here is to examine several examples in order to extract a conceptual approach for solving this problem.

After four years at the Minneapolis Guthrie Theater, artistic director, Liviu Ciulei said, "We alienated conservative audiences,

but we were invaded by new, young ones. We could shape our audiences. It's what I would like to do in this country."[7] Mike Steele, drama critic for the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, contends that the Guthrie has become a director's theatre and the rigorously modern approach to classics has been daring, sometimes erratic and occasionally awful. Like Ciulei's approach fellow Romanian director Lucian Pintilie's Tartuffe at Arena Stage was set in a cavernous white tiled room and the play began farcically with a basket of apples spilling out and covering the stage. Style was pushed to the extreme. He said, "To do a play I must have an obsession with a point of view about it. I want it to be unpredictable, even to myself."[8] Andrei Serban, another Romanian-born director "draws more from his actors, collaborates more, is willing to deal with improvisation."[9] His 1982 Guthrie production of The Marriage of Figaro had characters wheeling about on roller skates and in grocery carts in order to express the modern theatrical essence of the play. However the methods of these directors differ each has a goal in mind. Each is concerned with exploring the text, in some cases manipulating the content, in order to bring out new meanings. All of these directors will undoubtedly continue to be controversial. Ciulei calls his work "permanent research" and he is suspicious of routine. Whether controversial or traditional the first step for a director is to establish a goal, to have a point of view.

To have a point of view, however, does not automatically mean

distortion of content or the inherent meaning of a playscript. Probably nothing is worse in directing than distortion for its own sake or for the director's sake. On the other hand consider what is handed down from generation to generation and is commonly called tradition.

Pintilie asks of those who want traditional productions, "What is tradition?" He believes that no one knows what it is. He wants his vision to be expressed but only after careful and deep study of the plays, and after months of exploration.

What should the director do, for example, to revive Shakespeare's King Lear? Performances by Orson Welles, Charles Laughton, Paul Scofield in the existential Peter Brook production, James Earl Jones, Michael Redgrave and Laurence Olivier can hardly be said to have established tradition.[10]

A most unusual revival of King Lear was performed at the Riverside Shakespeare Co. in March of 1985, New York City. This revival staged in a small choir loft theatre of the west side Presbyterian church and directed by W. Stuart McDowell was an adaptation written by Nahum Tate in 1681. Tate, who was Poet Laureate of England, found Shakespeare's text unsuitable for the stage. He revised it by cutting out the Fool, rescuing Cordelia from death by uniting her romantically with Edgar, and ending the play happily by restoring Lear to the throne. This was the version which prevailed for 150 years. The director's purpose

in reviving this version was to reflect an 18th Century point of view, its taste and the morals which shaped the thinking of our own Republic, particularly the climate of optimism that promulgated the belief that good would triumph over evil.[11] The question of tradition is one that is not easily answered.

Tradition is again challenged in the 1985 production of Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew at the American Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut, directed by Zoe Caldwell. Miss Caldwell chose to stage the modernized A.L. Rowse version. The English scholar's new editions of Shakespeare's plays have aroused some of the British-American contemporaries who believe that Shakespeare should not be tampered with. Director Caldwell said, "I had five editions of Taming of the Shrew in front of me. Even among the standard editions there are differences. I have always been one for not cutting Shakespeare. But just before I was going into production I heard that Professor Rowse had done a modern version. I read it and saw that it was done by a purist. His changes are really quite minor. Actually, I am at liberty to use as much or as little as I wish. In some places, I reinstate the original language."[12]

Professor Rowse believes what was grammatical 400 years ago can often be ungrammatical today. He has changed plural subjects with single verbs such as, "Is Bushy, Green, and the Earl of Wiltshire dead?;" and double negatives such as "Nor shall you not think neither;" and double comparatives such as "This is more

worser than before." He has eliminated the wouldsts and shouldsts, the thous and thines. Gathering information and making judgments is part of the process of understanding tradition and seeking relevance.[13]

Newly discovered values in the seldom produced classics can sometimes lead to exciting revivals. This was apparently true in the Ark Theatre production of Calderon de la Barca's 1635 classic Life is a Dream in New York's Soho district. Don Marcus and two other artistic directors freshly discovered this play of the Spanish Golden Age. They felt this was not a play of psychological character study but rather one of typology.[14] Rene Buch, artistic director of New York's Repertorio Español said the reason Calderon is particularly difficult for the American actor and director is that we have been brought up to see character in terms of psychological realism but in the Spanish classics there is no subtext. Characters say exactly what they mean.[15] Marcus thought that it was necessary to see Life is a Dream as a dramatic trope rather than as a thematic study of honor. The point was not whether the peculiarly Spanish idea of honor is "relevant" to American audiences, but whether it serves a dramatic function. For these reasons they found a key to early Spanish drama other than the clichéd conflicts of honor and revenge. The values found helped to choose the best solution for reviving this play.

The critics rather than the audience are the ones most likely to evaluate the director's influence because it takes a certain sophistication to understand what a director actually does. American director Ellis Rabb came in conflict with the critics in his latest production staged at the Circle in the Square Theatre just off Broadway. In reviving Arthur Schnitzler's Affairs of Anatol he concluded that the play "...is really about an artist's effort to understand the most profound riddle of human behavior -- over and above this instinct to breed, there is an incredible life force, this fatal attraction between the sexes. The play is really an odyssey of a certain kind of search."[16] Working together with Nicholas Martin he shaped a new version which was entitled The Loves of Anatol. They transposed portions in order to form a memory play motivated from memorabilia pulled from a jewelry box. Separate affairs reinacted were linked together by two dancers who interpretatively suggested romantic Viennese waltzes. An added scene showed Anatol as an older man who Rabb believed was "...enriched by experience, by a fullness." Mel Gussow's evaluation of the results of this revival differed from the director's. He thought the directorial approach sacrificed both the vibrancy of Schnitzler's play and the depth of Anatol's wanderlust.[17]

One realizes that even in a carefully prepared process of reviving a play in such a way as to give it new relevance to a

contemporary audience the directing process is fraught with risks. One is that the audience or the critics may evaluate the results differently from the director. Even if the director is highly acclaimed for the work there is still another risk. As Peter Sellars says, "The terrible crisis of being a director is the ease with which massive egotism sets in. You're convinced you're doing something no one else can do, which of course is preposterous."[18]

At best the problems of being innovative as a director and reviving plays can only be minimized. T.S. Eliot believed that innovation and tradition are in no way opposed to each other and that there is such a thing as "the present moment of the past."

The dilemma is really not a dilemma if the director studies the play to be revived in the total cultural context, relates values of the past to those of the present, and develops a point of view with meaningful perspective. What Heinrich Zimmer says about the myths of fairy tales in his book The King & the Corpse is also true of the classical dramas of the past:

> "They are the everlasting oracles of life. They have to be questioned and consulted anew, with every age, each age approaching them with its own variety of ignorance and understanding, its own set of problems, and its own inevitable questions. For the life patterns that we of today have to

weave are not the same as those of any other day; the threads to be manipulated and the knots to be untangled differ greatly from those of the past. The replies already given, therefore, cannot be made to serve us. The powers have to be consulted again directly -- again, again, and again. Our primary task is to learn, not so much what they are said to have said as how to approach them, evoke fresh speech from them, and understand that speech."[19]

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